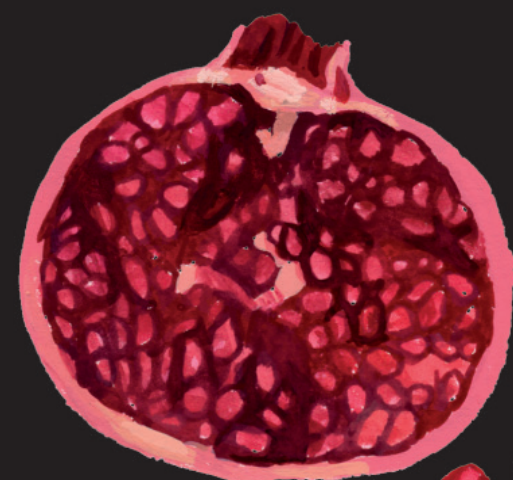




STRANGE FRUIT



POEMS BY
HELEN MOFFETT

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

STRANGE FRUIT



STRANGE FRUIT

**POEMS BY
HELEN MOFFETT**

Publication © Modjaji Books 2009
Text © Helen Moffett 2009

First published in 2009 by Modjaji Books CC
P O Box 385, Athlone, 7760, South Africa
modjaji.books@gmail.com
<http://modjaji.book.co.za>

ISBN 978-0-9802729-6-3

Book design: Natascha Mostert
Cover artwork and lettering: Hannah Morris
Cover photograph: David Le Page

Printed and bound by Mega Digital, Cape Town
Set in Palatino 10/13 pt

For Gus Ferguson, with love and thanks



Acknowledgements

I'm very grateful to the National Arts Council for giving me a grant to support the writing of this collection.

Thanks to the following readers for support and advice: Mary Armour, Arthur Attwell, Shabbir Banoobhai, Finuala Dowling, Gus Ferguson, Lynda Gilfillan, David Le Page, Stephen Watson.

You each took me by the hand
and tugged me along.

Two of the poems in this collection were written at the FEMRITE African women writers' residency in Kampala, Uganda, in November 2008. I'm grateful to this dynamic NGO for hosting me, and especially to Winnie, for the gift of the story in "Writer's block", as well as permission to publish it here, and to use her first name.

Special thanks and lifelong gratitude go to the following brave people: Sally Swartz, the first reader of every poem here; Carol Thomas, my gynaecologist, but sadly, not my obstetrician; and especially Colleen Higgs (and her magic Modjaji team) for embracing this project with insight and love.

Some of these poems have been previously published in slightly different forms in *Carapace*, *New Contrast* and Litnet (www.litnet.co.za).

Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Writer's block	9
Another country	11
To Christina Rossetti	12
Evening stables	13
Gathering waterblommetjies	14
What mountains dream of	15
Blessings	16
On hearing of the death, by suicide, of an old friend	17
Libra rising	18
Real magic	19
Angel	20
We will fight them at La Playa	21
Strange fruit	23
Mined	24
Reply to Ariel	25
The Sentinel	26
Valediction	28
Always	29
In praise of younger men	30
Amphibian	31
Homo erectus	32
After sex	33
Baby shower	34
The ultrasound	35
Geology lesson	36
The ovary in the arm	37
See through	38
Battle stations	39
At thirty-six	40
Vigil	44
My daughter	46
Envy	47
Pushkin	48
In Cape Town	49
Fade	50
Window of opportunity	51
Relativity	52
The disa that found us	54
Cedar and cinnamon	55
The flamenco teacher	56

Writer's block

On the hotel terrace overlooking milky Lake Victoria,
Winnie, slim at sixty, elegant, prayerful,
turns the talk to writer's block.

She cannot make progress with her novel.

Then, with no sense of *non sequiter*,
she speaks of life under Idi Amin,
and the soldiers' long reign of terror.

"Perhaps I should write it," she says.

"But who will care? Everyone has forgotten.

Besides, I do not want to remember."

There is a pause. The kites hover.

And as sudden as the downpour in the hot afternoons,
her words come: the story of the roadblock,

how the soldiers told her and her friend,

"You ladies, come with us. Driver, carry on."

It was dusk. The driver risked his life,
refusing point-blank to leave without them.

For two hours, they pleaded in Swahili.

For two hours, guns waved, threats were made.

Then suddenly, it was over. Go, go,

said the soldiers, losing interest.

Winnie made some excuse for her lateness that night.

She never told her husband how close she came

to never coming home at all.

Another day, her four-year-old son

ran screaming to the bathroom

where she stood washing herself:

"Soldiers! Soldiers are here!"

Her only thought: "Lord, let me not die naked."

The house was searched for guns –

saucepans, books, panties, all

excavated and tossed about –

mattresses slit, suitcases hacked at.

Baulked, empty-handed, the soldiers
chased them out of their despoiled home:
“Go to church, now, hurry!
Do not run to warn your neighbours.”

There is another pause. Kingwa,
at twenty-five, is indignant – the rest of us, older,
know how madness can surge into the sweetest day.

Another country

In other countries, I become a different person.

In Uganda, I drink beer after Tuskers beer,
and in Barbados, home-made herb rum.

In Alaska, I drive a four-by-four.

In Ireland, I stick out my thumb.

In Greece, I share a room with strangers.

And everywhere, I get up before dawn,
climbing out of windows if I have to,
scrambling to catch first light.

On the sacred isle of Iona, adrift in the Hebrides,

I walk along a beach, confessing,
clutching the hand of an impossible man

I have known for all of three days.

And I skydive into love, freefalling,
wind whistling past my ears.

A day later, I kiss him

in the middle of the night,

in the middle of a storm,

spray wet on our faces,

caught in the boom of a kettledrum.

At home, I never do any of these things.

I'm a white-wine girl who doesn't see sunrise.

My car is small and second-hand.

I seldom take risks.

And while I might fall in love,

I no longer jump out of planes,

hurtle into the heart of the wind.

But maybe I should. Live in another country.

for Sean McDonagh

To Christina Rossetti

Those years, sitting in the binding hush
of the Bodleian Library,
parchment leaves sifting down outside,
I turned the pages of your tiny notebooks
tracing the progress of each poem;
after the initial burst, words cascading down,
the hard work beginning:
stoking the refining fire,
scouring every line.
I had no idea that one day
I would also wrestle, endlessly
pick at a knot of words, strain to make
language go where I wanted.

I scrutinised your laundry lists,
your letters, even the dull ones of thanks;
at Princeton, in a room glossy with wealth,
they let me hold your hair in my hand.

Perhaps some germ jumped; perhaps
I learnt more than I knew;
perhaps you showed me
that poetry is possible; a strange fuse
of voices in the head and hands braced for toil.

Evening stables

As dusk settled down, so did the horses:
and for a spell, life would hang in
perfect balance; gleam of liquid eyes,
noses nudging in troughs; one of the
bolder cats trowling from his perch
on a broad bay back; outside,
the resident owls warming up
for half an hour's counterpoint
of notes soft as down and deep
as the darkness catching the trees;
inside, warmth rising like bread
from my pony's sturdy frame
as I'd lean against his barrel girth;
the toasty smells of oats and molasses
all underpinned by the steady rhythm
of chomping; more soothing, consoling
than any lullaby.

for Apple Blossom, Locket, Irak, Roma and especially Charles and Serenade.

Gathering waterblommetjies

A wintergreen afternoon in the Overberg:
the bust of a woman on a shelf of dam-water
her frizzed halo electrified by four o' clock sun –
one hand holds a plastic bag aloft
the other threshes, garnering from
the raft of slippery porpoise blooms
upon which she rests her stolid breasts.

What mountains dream of

Slumbering in the sheet of heat
smoothed gently across the Little Karoo.
No wind. Only warmth, but it doesn't press.
It floats, draping the spines and ribs
into which history has folded these ranges.
Raging hormones of the earth's adolescence
blasted entire continents into the sky
leaving the remnants to drift down and lie
locked into peace, immobile, their flanks
not even twitching in the drowsy summer
afternoons. Now they breathe in time with
the slowly passing centuries of geology's clock,
the beat too deep to resonate in our bones.
But the mountains hear it in their sleep:
tick, and then: aeons later, tock.

for Dan and Vindra Reddy

Blessings

You are one crazy saint.
Out in the bush at midnight on a mission
to visit, comfort the newly bereaved,
you're ambushed by drunken, adolescent "war vets" –
savagely beaten, robbed, left in a ditch.

You lay there all night long, counting your blessings.

"Thank God it was gum-poles, not pangas.
Thank God they smashed my hip and not my skull.
Thank God it's a warm night in Africa;
if this was Europe, I'd die of hypothermia
before morning or help came.
Thank God for the softness of the mud;
for the sky freckled with singing stars
to keep me company through this travail."

for Keith Martin

On hearing of the death, by suicide, of an old friend

I keep thinking of the light in the Cedarberg
and the spartan showers and lumpy beds
in Wupperthal that weekend we went hiking.
The light, the light on stone in the Cedarberg
and the wasp that stung my breast
and the clenchingly cold rock-pools
and the dusty hunt for spring flowers
rewarded only by ridgelines growing against pure blue.
And the light.

in memory of Rosanna Strauss

Libra rising

The last time I visited the farm,
you shook me awake at some witching hour,
excited as a child before Christmas;
chivvied me into a dressing-gown
and Wellington boots, waving a torch:
“I want to show you something,” you said.
Muffled, muddled with dreams, yet trusting,
I tromped out after you, crunching across
the frosted garden decked in silence and silver;
down through the gate, towards the dam,
the longer grass now swishing.

The moon had set,
leaving the constellations holding court
in a sky molten with pouring stars.
“Look,” you said, pointing towards the ridge
beneath the dense swirl of the Milky Way,
“You can see Libra rising.”
And there it was: perfect.
Like those swooping
V-shapes that signify seagulls
in old-fashioned illustrations.

Back in the house, the kitchen
warmth a delicious reminder
of how cold we’d been outside;
you heated milk with vanilla,
enough for my father as well,
when he trundled in, fogged with sleep,
to ask what we womenfolk were up to;
married to you long enough to
grunt in understanding, find it normal
that you’d get up and go out on
a winter’s night, just to look at the stars –
and want to share them with your daughter.

Real magic

My mother woke me one morning
and said, "Look out the window."
There in the scrubby field
stood a miracle: where yesterday
one brown bulging mare had grazed,
a wavering foal now docked at her side.
I was open-mouthed, enchanted –
Father Christmas, fairies, goblins,
princesses, spells – they couldn't compete.
This magic was real.

Skip forward several decades,
and I'm sitting by my sister's side
as she grinds through labour.
Rugged hours pass.
I step out for coffee, and
returning, find in that brief hiatus,
her child has finally passaged
from inside to outside her body.

A few minutes ago, my sister
was alone on that bed,
her baby present only on monitors,
anxiously observed scrawls of jag and pulse,
a gallop of tiny hooves thundering along –
now, where there was one,
there are two; the squeaking, waving
tiny parcel on her naked chest
is a soul entirely its own:
and we all hush in the presence
of great magic.

Angel

My niece is an angel
in her first Nativity play:
face clear as water, with
every feeling rippling across;
fierce concentration, but with
eyes occasionally wavering
to where we sit, rapt in adoration:
and then the smile bursts out,
the wriggle of pure joy,
she knows she shouldn't wave,
but her fingers waggle at us anyway.

for Lauren

We will fight them at La Playa

I

You and I are at the Waterfront
on a secret mission:
it may look as if we are drinking coffee
and eating florentines;
but in truth we have bazookas,
and are shooting every twosome
we see holding hands.
Not parents with kids –
or old folks who've made it through –
that would be mean.
No, just the couples who clutch
at each other's paws
and clog up the doors,
get in the way on escalators.
Far too many are doing it,
it's getting out of hand;
so we are here to clean the place up:
sighting, squinting, firing,
nudging each other,
"Look, there's another pair!"
"You missed! Don't let them get away!"
If our colleagues could see us now:
shrieking with gorgeous glee
behaving, with relish, childishly.

II

You think that's bad?
Wait till we've got a few drinks in us.
We are famously weak-headed,
both of us raised in teetotal homes:
as you say, "We make cheap dates" –
one margarita, followed by only
one glass of Chardonnay each,

and we're helpless, hopeless
can't stop giggling, trawling
Exclusives and Woolies
until we're sober enough to drive home.

That's how I got these shoes:
the pink satin ones with sequins
and crystal beads, and teetering
gold kitten heels. "Go on,
buy them," you cried merrily.
It seemed like a good idea at the time.
The next day, clutching my head,
I pretended rue; but was
secretly elated to discover
twinkling in my cupboard
a pair of Barbie shag-me shoes.

Strange fruit

No one knows how to unpeel me.
Some days, brilliantly coloured,
highly polished, I offer
no grip for fingers.
Some days, I'm scarred and scaled,
leathery like a litchi
no suggestion of sweet pulp.
But if you can find
my invisible fault-line
and crack me open,
I am juicy inside.

Mined

Loving me must be like visiting the Balkans.
I'm told it's lovely there; seen the pictures
of pastoral valleys, dappled woods
secluded inlets of blue dispersing islands;
all dotted with bridges, quaint villages
and monasteries of antique masonry
speaking eloquently of culture and craft.
But a flak jacket and tin hat are advised;
over some innocent hill you'll find,
without warning, a site where violation
has soaked into the earth, something
has been razed, horror still haunts,
with shrapnel and tank-traps in the lulling grass.

And the history – the history: no matter
how hard you try, you'll never quite grasp
why one sniping shot triggers a world war.

Reply to Ariel

I wish my bones were made of coral.
I wish they lay in some turquoise cove
clean ivory in cashmere water.
I wish my ribs were garlanded with
stars and flowers, their fronds
stroking in time to sea's soft pulse;
with small fish flicking like paint
through the bowl of my pelvic girdle
gently rocking as a tropical tide
hushes back and forth, back and forth.

Wish and hush, says the distant surf:
the reef will keep you safe from my surges
as you lie free on the floor of the sea.

The Sentinel

Climbing the mountain with my father,
on a dry, wind-chapped spring day,
I remember a childhood,
in which he magically translated
the world for us, so that every
rock, bird, bush, bloom
spoke to us by name.

How patient he becomes,
coaxing me up the slopes,
alien and hunched, much bigger
and balder than in the busy Cape.
And courteous: he watches every step,
every handhold – gently, “Always look
before gripping a ledge – a berg-adder
might be sunning itself.”
I have bigger worries: chest tight
at the thought of the chain ladder –
its vertiginous drop.
But my dad has lugged a rope and gear along
so that he can belay me up and over my fears.

On top, giddy with relief,
I almost skip along the country’s roof;
but now my father has met several souls,
and is conversing at length in Sotho,
of which I have only the courtesies.
As soon as we continue, I ask
a question straight from childhood,
“Daddy, what did they say?”

It's started: the packing away of memories
against inevitable impossible loss.
Dear God, let me keep this day always
for when I need
a rope at my waist,
an interpreter for a world
of unfamiliar tongues.

Valediction

The last time we made love
was on a spring evening in London,
birds gossiping and squabbling to nest.
Our borrowed bed was matronly and sagging,
decanting you effortlessly into me,
the pleasure equally effortless,
an act of art long perfected.
Afterwards, every nerve twittering
in contentment, I stayed in bed
while you dressed. We were surprisingly
cheerful. We knew it was our last encore.
I watched you lope down the street,
towards Holland Park, where
chestnut trees in Byronic green
matched the heaping clouds showing off
an overblown sunset. Threw the window open,
one last wave, tempted to flash you,
wanting you to leave laughing;
I loved you so much, and not enough.

We had one more chance, years later,
on a sun-dusted street in Cape Town,
our bodies recalling the angle of yearning;
I came so close to keeping my mouth under
your goodbye kiss, leading you back into the house.
There was no living soul to betray; only
that London street fresh with dusk,
your walking away, released, waving, smiling.
I could not be unfaithful to that farewell.

Always

I never stop loving anyone.
But there comes a point
when I dust everything down,
shake out the cloths,
and carry them up to the attic.
There I fold up my love,
lovingly, tuck lavender in,
layer it into a cedar chest,
close the lid.

Then I go back downstairs,
and get on with things.

But every now and then,
on nights of summer rain,
I'll open one of my trunks:
and grow immediately dizzy
with the fragrance swarming up;
carrying not just memories
but all that love fresh again.

In praise of younger men

It's not just the obvious things;
their bodies not yet freighted
with gravity or mortality,
their recuperative powers in bed;
the most refreshing element
is that for most, a cigar is just a cigar.
If I invite a man my age, or older
for lunch, or drinks, or tea,
he assumes it's an assignation;
swaggers in, certain of my desperation.
But for younger men, my suggestion
that we meet for coffee or a walk
is always taken at face value.
And they rarely leer. If I catch them
looking at my breasts, they blush.
They make such good listeners, too,
enthralled by my travels and tales,
instead of expecting me to be the one
to hang on every word they utter.

So raise your glasses to younger men;
in their innocence, they may be arrogant;
they're randy, and sometimes astonishingly
ignorant; but they were raised breathing air
laced with equality. And this is why
I like them so much. They've not caught
the fatal habit: the tendency to patronise.

Amphibian

The penis is an amphibious creature;
mostly it lives on dry land,
but given the chance, it slips
joyously back into a moister
environment, where it grows
gills of glee, glides in this
primordial clime, this balmy
tropical sea, swimming
in ambergris and musk,
slithering through humid clasp
and pulse, leaping
higher, diving deeper:
in its element.

Homo erectus

Erections are the most extraordinary things;
especially to those of us who lack the mechanism.
One minute you pull me into an easy, affectionate hug –
the next, a third party has announced its presence:
taking muscular shape against my belly,
a rude and raucous conjuring trick
(which I am tempted to call “sleight of prick”).
You are impressing me – literally.
By now I have the measure of you
all the way to my navel.

I note you are a most appealing size –
promising, but not threatening.
I have questions: Is this proximity or desire?
How can something so implacable be so warm?
What does it feel like to have your own flesh
do exactly as it pleases? And most of all,
what does one say at such moments?
“Excuse me, but your penis has taken a shine to me?”

What I’d really like to do
is unzip and lucky-dip you,
dabble my fingertips in your dew,
But I am too polite, too shy, too proud.

The kettle boils. I step back,
make tea, keep close custody of my eyes.

After sex

Others may be sad. Not me.
My body still reverberating
like a brushed gong or rung bell
or stroked harp strings, *glissando*
chord held lingering, pedal *legato*.

The harmonics keep humming
the echoes resonating
for hours. No wonder
my musician lover,
also a virtuoso,
said, "It's like playing
a beautiful instrument."

For at least a day or so
I cross my legs with care,
so not as to set the chime
thrumming through me again;
distracting when teaching
a class on rhythm and rhyme.

Baby shower

"Haven't you had your babies yet?" she said.

This as tea and cake were passed.

"Haven't you had your babies yet?"

As if I had left my shopping on the bus.

Sitting among a welter of objects
the likes of which I will never own,
animal mobiles, breast pumps,
an aunt's exquisite embroidery
and packs of disposable nappies,
I am the only woman present
with neither baby nor fecund swell.
The words "with child" translate for me
without child always bloody always
without.

"How old are you, anyway?" she said.

And lit a cigarette.

The ultrasound

Every woman has two:
almonds, sweet and milky,
seed, kernel, fruit, harvest:
but I have ticking inside
two lumped and lunar fists
scarred and blasted with rage.

Geology lesson

The annual ordeal of the breast exam in progress,
the specialist points approvingly to my X-rays:

“We’re seeing a lot of glandular involution –
that would explain the lumps.”

(These have had me sweating at night.)

“And of course, crystallisation in the ducts –
to be expected at this time of life.”

I clutch my gown, not certain whether
like Lot’s wife, I am turning into salt;
or whether the shadowy plates on light
record my flesh congealing into stone.

The ovary in the arm

A woman undergoing cancer treatment had her fertility saved after doctors transplanted her ovary into her arm. – Sunday Times, 14 November 2004

I am sick of this; the way folk offer me
Dr Frankenstein's laboratory,
holding out science like some charm:
"They can do wonders these days!"
"Have you thought of fertility treatment?"

No. It never occurred to me.
I only know everything a layperson
could ever digest – thanks to a cold collation
of journals, the Internet, a dozen consultations
with specialists. I am only too adept:
along with the miracles, I have the
pulverising figures on failure rates
and crippling costs at my fingertips.
All this to jolt a speck of plasm into life –
while the compound interest of AIDS
is multiplying orphans as we speak.

All I wanted was natural, normal
the everyday stuff;
conceiving in passion,
a common-place burgeoning
an ordinary breeding and birthing.
So little to ask for;
beyond impossible to get.

See through

It was the year I became invisible.
I took to my bed, slept half a year away,
then arose hag-ridden, haggard, a hag:
hair grey and lifeless, bones creaking,
a face that sagged, skin crumpling
and my curves buried
in a blizzard of fat. Twenty kilos
in eight months. Everyone
assumed I'd been bingeing fit to bust.
It took years of prodding and tests
to identify the culprits: my ovaries,
always bolshy, finally gone on strike.
The hormonal uproar that ensued
kiboshed my insulin too: hence
the lardy indignity, and the way eyes
now slid past me, overlooking me.
For months, I waddled round
(black hair blanched, marshmallow face
I didn't recognise in mirrors)
in shock: *how could I disappear like this?*

Now I coat my hair with carcinogenic chemicals
do constant battle with carbohydrates, exercise
more and more. I've painted and panted
myself back into existence: almost.
But can't forget how easy, almost peaceful
It is to simply vanish: slip off the map.
Fat and plain will always do the trick.

Battle stations

Having been mugged by my own womb,
I decide to call the big guns in.
After all, early menarche isn't natural;
apparently it lops at life expectancy.
Science is conscripted, the round
of pills, hormones, programmes begun;
I go the holistic route, too:
diet, acupuncture, reiki, I try
everything wholeheartedly,
including prayer. I am entirely
disappointed; left wholly broke.
Holy Mother of God, *it's not fair*.

The drugs, meanwhile, are awful.
but one magic bullet in particular
promises much: fertility restored,
my body would no longer hoard
every speck of glucose in my blood;
I'd get my waistline back
along with my lost youth:
no more memory lapses,
humiliating drenchings of sweat,
whiskers sprouting from my chin.
Never mind that. All I hear is:
my fertility restored. Restored.
I endure the side-effects,
which are vile, to no avail:
"Thirteen per cent non-responders,"
sighs my gynaecologist,
"and you have to be one of them."

I go home and weep. Like never before or since.
Vow not to hope again. It costs too much.

At thirty-six

Time is out of joint all right.
Mid-thirties should be:
prime time, grown-up time,
happy-ever-after time,
love time, home time, nest time,
time to marry, time to breed:
time for seeds, time for roots.

I walk down avenues of
everyone else's summers
shivering in my winter clothes.



At that confident moment of poise
between maid and matron
I find I am neither:
some curse has turned me
into a hag, a crone.
No wonder I've taken
to muttering incantations.



An earnest friend tells me,
"Think of hot flushes as power surges!"
I want to mash her face.

A wiser friend says,
"No, it's not fair. But that
doesn't make it unfair."



I wish I was a toddler
so I could scream and scream
scream and scream and rage
and scream and rage and scream.



Don't reach a hand to me
on a hot-flush day –
I'm liable to turn on you
with wolverine shriek
and tear it off at the wrist.
The aftermath worse than
sunburn: as if a rake
has ploughed up my skin.



Rabid as a meercat,
I repeatedly ram
a stranger's car;
no way to explain
the savage derangement
of possession
by hormonal fiends –
the shameless swoop
from the trapeze of insane.



Every time I see you, I think
I wish I'd had your child
I wish, wish I'd had your child.
Watching you bend to your darling son –
I wish I'd had your child.
Wish I had tricked you, trapped you,
not been so damn punctilious
about taking the Pill (it chokes me now).
It feels like adultery,
but I cannot help myself:
I wish I'd had your child,
I wish, wish I'd had your child.



Hope flares and fades
and flares and fades and flares –
taken hostage by my own body,
time jolts by like cattle trucks.
No negotiation possible.
Glaciers of silence grind on.
It's terrifying
bunkered down in this
no-one's land
vacuum
wasteland
waitland
dreading an outburst of barbaric frenzy
lungs craving oxygen
getting only chlorine gas.
Times when I just want
bloody blade at my neck
for this to be over.



All my life, I've been tugged along by the moon,
one barren trailing another. No matter
how recalcitrant the stutterings of my body
I only had to read the moon's scarred face
to track the drag and surge of my own tides.

But now I am set adrift,
barred from all the physics of the universe:
gravity no longer applies
here in the doldrums,
while the moon sails on, indifferent,
a stranger now.

Postscript

I grow green again.
Surely all those poets can't be wrong.
Fiddle-head ferns uncurl from bitter mulch –
spring has a thousand thousand ways
of proffering comfort.

Yet hope is hopeless –
there are no bulbs, roots here
to pierce earth's crust with fuzz.
But I do believe there must be
a way out of these Puritan woods:

Surely the trees will thin to pasture,
and at last present a vista
offering a spot where I'll be happy
to stop, spread a blanket,
open a picnic basket –
find a flask of peace within; and
sit and sip and savour the view.

Vigil

Please, a moment of stillness:
I'm watching myself die.
Holding my own hand
as my gene-pool drains away.
I'm keeping vigil
at the deathbed of my DNA,
my fingerprints, a thousand
quirks bestowed by countless
ancestors:

the Cossack who
bequeathed an affinity for horses,
a great-grandmother's coloratura voice,
someone's photographic memory
along with the knack of playing
almost any tune by ear,
the familial tendency to myopia,
my unmistakably Jewish profile
and rain-washed complexion
courtesy of the Irish side.
A babel of voices, benefactors,
bequeathers of personality,
all betrayed here: led down
the dead end of my body.

Anyone can be a parent,
though millions are unsuited to the job;
and I think about adoption daily,
social workers blanching at my sandcastle health:
but that is not what I am talking about now.

I am watching myself dying,
and it's dark in the cave,
witnessing the last blue flame
waver and shrink. Just because
the struggle is silent, makes it no less intense

or intent. The life-force won't surrender
easily; and I need to bear witness.
So please, grant me just this:
this moment of silence.

My daughter

My daughter would be thirteen by now.
With our genes, she'd certainly be musical:
I'd be attending her recitals or band practice.
She'd be leggy and serene – or maybe
a dynamo package of elbows and energy
poised to dive into white-water adolescence.
Either way, she'd be beautiful:
if I'd burgled your body.

But I'll never know.
I had neither the courage nor clairvoyance
necessary to mount such an audacious raid –
I did the right thing at the time. It's crazy
to feel like the one robbed.

Envy

This is my lot: to see pregnant women,
mothers with babies everywhere,
families, parents with orbiting children,
the parade never seems to stop.
So envy and I are very old friends:
I have the upper hand – mostly –
although the odd shaft runs me through.

But the clammy agony subsides in the end;
I don't go careening down the street,
screaming, hissing, stabbing at eyes with nails:
instead, I attend baby showers and christenings
armed with thoughtful gifts and tasteful hats;
I congratulate, dispense adorable booties,
make casseroles and allowances too.

This is my dubious gift, the compensatory coin
the bad fairy left behind when cursing me:
the capacity to contain without spilling
the viridian bile. Others are quite safe from it,
especially you, poor forked thing, a man –
wombless, childless: you have nothing I want.

Pushkin

Pets have been shown to have significant beneficial effects in the management of depression in patients – Textbook of Psychiatry, Robertson et al, 2001.

I am lucky to have
my dilapidated cat.
She chose me herself;
abandoned the neighbours,
moved in with me.
A moth-eaten moggy,
she shreds and sheds
and snores mightily.
She has no manners
(she once wrested a prawn
from the fork of a guest)
and a seal's nose for fish
given to gruff shrieks
whenever I open a can;
although wholly self-serving
she's affectionate;
and for this, I forgive all.
She always purrs
when kissed, never sulks,
and washes my face
with kindly vigour
every now and again
biting my nose
to keep me on my toes.

I watch her sleep
a snuffling heap
at the foot of my bed;
a tortoise-shell sandbag
between me and the abyss.

In Cape Town

On a bitter day
in a bitter time,
I'm at a wedding
overlooking Table Bay.

Across a sea shouting blue
back at the sinking sun
a red container ship passes
as if drawn by a string.

This happens as the Imam
intones a passage
from the Qu'ran.
Most merciful,
most gracious
voice and view splice
and for a slice
of a second, I'm jolted
into unexpected joy.

*Written on the occasion of the marriage of Tazkiyah Banoobhai and
Yunus Noordien.*

Fade

At the restaurant in the harbour
I ask, "Is that the sea I hear?"
Amazed, my companion points to the
waves flinging themselves on rocks
only a spray's length away.
I could see the sea; was filling
in the soundtrack from memory.

Trapdoors open up in fabric of air:
small things swallowed wholesale.
A ticking clock, bubble of kettle –
these are gone, for good.
I watch a jazz quartet perform;
I can discern piano, flute and drum
but the bass player's fingers
scurry about silently.

So it's not that I can't hear –
but sound is drowned, underwater,
blurred, wavering; harder and harder
to fish out words:
codes, signs (no wonders), ciphers
all are leaving me –
bone displacing word.

Window of opportunity

I go through a compulsive stage
of telling every person I can corner;
I have this tiny window of opportunity
in which I might conceivably conceive –
last chance, last live ember.

I tell a stranger at a dinner party:
loosened by wine, emboldened
by the webbing around her eyes,
her cherubic child a mid-forties surprise.
She starts sketching scenarios:
“Imagine meeting a guy in a bar
and dropping that into the conversation:
he’d rush for the men’s room –
climb out the window to escape!”
Friends join in – it gets quite raucous:
“So don’t tell all at once –
leave it for the third date –
that way, the rush will be to the airport,
he’ll be buying fake ID en route!”
We laugh and laugh, clutch our sides:
next morning, it’s not my head that aches.

Relativity

In a parallel universe, I live
in a small New England college town;
I teach on campus; so does my husband.
We're both scrambling through the rat-pace
of the publish-or-perish tenure-track race;
I have two children and never enough time.
I live in a clapboard house (no picket fence)
with hardwood floors I pad across in socks.
I am familiar with the scrunch of snow underfoot;
own things like ear-muffs; worry about the boiler.
Some things are the same; in the kitchen,
a box for recycling, tub for compost scraps,
a fridge bright with magnets and memorabilia
Except here they call it refrigerator.

Am I happy? I think so. My children
have taught me what love is, how it
embeds in soul and flesh. My husband
is kind, clever, handsome in certain lights;
we live past each other mostly,
a fact we bemoan at the occasional
dinner snatched together, before talk
turns to the kids; is the new school
working out? Becky begged for
violin lessons, now won't practice:
should we push her, persevere? But
we still make love on weekend afternoons
when the children are out the house,
shrugging off the slight sensation of
one more thing ticked off the list.
At nights I fall into the embrace
of our sheets, swooning for sleep,
knowing that the next morning
the entire mechanism will be kicking
in relentlessly, ticking frenetically.

I had my chance to make the quantum
leap to this alternate world. In my present one,
I'm just as short of time. I do get to have
great gobs of alone (perhaps too much):
but I know it's the one thing my parallel self
pines for with something akin to homesickness.

The disa that found us

We were struck not blind,
but dumb, both pointing
at the manifestation alongside the
crumbling grey ridges of the jeep track:
arising out of an unpromising bush, no trickle
of moisture or kiss of shade under the clanging sun,
fleshy perfection of a flower: boudoir blue
finding no echo in the blowtorch sky or
depleted dams. Very British Brian
had never seen a disa before; and I,
the botanist's daughter, had failed
to look closely enough, note the
lobes of green like tonsils in the throat
striped with white, clean as toothpaste.

It was so unlikely, in all that haze of heat,
meshed in fynbos fraying from khaki to umber;
such a very Northern blue, sculpted shape:
leaping at us both in the same instant,
leading me to wonder how many other
epiphanies we miss because we can't believe
they might materialise in our particular path.

for Brian McClorry, S.J.

Cedar and cinnamon

Muir Woods, Marin County, California

A slice of cedar, cross-cut,
gives the longer view:

“I was in my prime, a hundred feet tall,
breathing my spice into the undisturbed air
when Columbus, sick of bland meat
and myopia, set forth in search of cinnamon,
nutmeg and all my pungent fellows.
Bark, seed and nut were my continent’s undoing –
I lived on another four centuries,
witnessing carnage, presiding over a wake,
until a storm toppled me.
No matter now: aside from this glossy wheel,
I am mulch, feeding the grandchildren
uncurling from my millennial roots.”

The flamenco teacher

She stirs the air with a fingertip
and we are all arrested
in our ragged line, in leotards,
hair scraped back, skirts like folded wings.
Then she takes three quick steps
and flares out, a sail catching wind;
and this, oh God, we are meant to emulate:

In the mirror I am discomforted to
catch myself, a buffalo among cranes,
and wonder if she, this exotic from Spain
is perplexed by me, my fumbling feet;

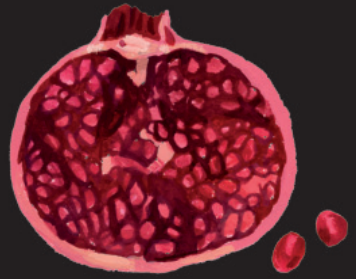
But this scuffed floor, this sweat, this
anxious counting, toe heel stamp stamp
is what clatters the shutters open, lets me see
her stir the air with a single fingertip.

for Inmaculada Ortega



STRANGE FRUIT

“ No one knows how to unpeel me.
Some days, brilliantly coloured,
highly polished, I offer
no grip for fingers.
Some days, I'm scarred and scaled,
leathery like a litchi
no suggestion of sweet pulp.
But if you can find
my invisible fault-line
and crack me open,
I am juicy inside. ”



STRANGE FRUIT is a courageous debut with a remarkable range in theme and tone, from the nostalgic to the comedic to the bawdy, and to the angry, the melancholic and the steadfast and comforting. It will delight, shock, anger, induce laughter, shock more, delight more. And make you blush. It's a full range. There are poems of brutally honest self-scrutiny – the heart of the collection being a series of poems on the ageing body, loss of love and infertility – and there are poems that capture landscapes with imagist skill and the botanist's detail. – *Rustum Kozain*



HELEN MOFFETT is a freelance editor, author and academic. She has lectured as far afield as Trinidad and Alaska, but calls Cape Town home. Teaching poetry at the University of Cape Town led her to compile a poetry anthology for Southern African students, *Seasons Come to Pass*. This is her first collection of her own poems.

